

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 12th March, 2020.

Present:- Councillors Dhaliwal (Chair), Basra, Gahir, Hulme, Matloob, D Parmar and S Parmar

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors Sarfraz and R Sandhu

PART I

60. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Gahir declared that he was a Hackney Carriage driver. He remained in the Council Chamber throughout the meeting.

61. Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 30th January 2020

Resolved - That the minutes of the meeting held on 30th January 2020 be approved as a correct record.

62. Member Questions

None were received.

63. Planning Performance, Resourcing, Customer Insight and Improvement Programme

The Planning Manager introduced a report regarding planning performance, resourcing, and the Customer Insight and Improvement Programme.

Members were informed that the Government had set out performance standards for Local Planning Authorities, measured over a two-year rolling period. Slough Council's performance for the speed of decision-making exceeded the national average. 97.1% of Slough's major applications were decided within 13 weeks', compared to the national average of 88.2% of applications. 85.3% of Slough's applications were decided within the statutory timescale compared to the national average of 88.8% of applications; however this was above the 70% target set by Government.

It was explained that whilst officers strove to determine applications for non-major developments within eight weeks', work was undertaken with applicants to negotiate proposals that would be acceptable in planning terms, and this led to time extensions being agreed to reach a positive decision for many applications. With regard to major developments, applicants were encouraged to enter into Planning Performance Agreements to allow officers to take a project managed approach to large and complex schemes. This

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approach had resulted in 91% of all planning applications being granted. The Council had had no major application appeals overturned; and only 1.4% of non-major development decisions had been overturned at appeal.

Members were informed that due to the high level of permanent vacancies in the Planning department, that in order to meet demand and customer expectation there was currently a significant reliance on agency staff.

As part of the Council's 'Futures Programme' work was currently underway to improve the Planning department's digital offer to improve the application process for customers. Planning systems were being redesigned to meet customer need, with the focus being improving information and establishing an online application tracking facility.

The Chair then invited comments and questions from Members.

During the course of the discussion, the following points were raised:

- A Member asked if agency staff were on long or short-term contracts. It was explained that there were a range of contracts in place. Initially, short-term contracts allowed for a trial period to gauge the standard of the officer's work. The market for agency planning officers was very competitive and Slough had to compete with other local authorities, including London borough councils and the private sector. The ambition of the Council's apprenticeship scheme's was to 'grow our own' staff, this was viewed as a positive approach which led to improve business continuity and a better customer experience.
- It was queried what incentives were offered to attract and retain staff. It was explained that Slough salaries were competitive, and there were benefits to working in the public as opposed to the private sector. For example: a comparatively generous leave allowance, flexible working and pension arrangements.
- A Member asked if the Council undertook Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) in-house or if this work was contracted out. It was explained that it was necessary to undertake EIA for major schemes, and this work required an officer to have specialist skills and knowledge. If there was capacity within the Planning department to carry out the necessary assessment, it was undertaken in-house; otherwise the work was procured externally.
- A Member asked how many women there were in the Planning department. It was confirmed that there were five women within the team.
- It was asked if the use of temporary rather than permanent staff generated a saving. It was explained that agency staff cost

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approximately 25-30% more due to the agency fee. However, the add-on costs, such as National Insurance and pension benefits, of recruiting permanent staff, meant the overall cost variance was negligible.

- It was queried whether regulations arising from the Grenfell Fire would result in additional staff resources being needed to carry out enforcement action. It was reported that the Council currently had one permanent and one agency enforcement officer. The Council's Cabinet had recently agreed to allocate sufficient resources to enable officers to enforce breaches in relation to properties used for Airbnb rental. It was explained that planning applications would be considered in light of the Grenfell Fire, but this was currently under review nationally and the detail of future requirements was not yet known.
- A Member asked if the Planning department received sufficient in-house IT support. The Planning Manager said he would welcome any additional support. He explained that as part of the Council's transformation programme, work was currently being undertaken to rebuild the planning IT systems, in conjunction with partners, Agile Application. The development of enhanced online support and the development of features such as chat bots were being explored.

The Chair thanked the Planning Manager for the report.

Resolved –

- (a) That the report be noted.
- (b) That the Committee expressed support for suitable IT assistance being provided to the Planning department.

64. Revenue Budget Monitoring Report 2019-20 Quarter 3

The Service Lead, Finance introduced a report that provided an update on the financial position of the Council's Revenue Account at Quarter 3 of the 2019-20 financial year.

Members were informed that at Quarter 3, the forecast year end position for all Council services was £107.727 million, resulting in an overspend of £1.102 million. In comparison to Quarter 2, the overspend had increased by £0.909 million.

Taking the Slough Children's Services Trust forecast financial position into account, the Council's exposure to financial risk was an estimated net expenditure forecast for the year of £108.879 million. This represented a potential budget overspend of £2.254 million, which was 2.11% above the approved budget.

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Members were provided with a summary of the key points detailed in the report:

- Slough Children's Services Trust (SCST) - due to the significant work undertaken by Slough Borough Council (SBC) officers and Department for Education (DfE) officials, the risk of SCST insolvency during 2019/20 had now been averted. SBC officers had worked closely with the SCST leadership team to understand the SCST's current financial position and support the organisation with initiatives to reduce the overspend. Both SBC and SCST officers had been in regular discussions with the DfE and the Local Government Association to highlight the ongoing financial pressures facing the Trust and children's services generally.
- The Housing Revenue Account was budgeted to spend £37.550 million in the current financial year; this gave a planned net deficit of £2.871 million. The deficit would be made up by a planned contribution from the housing reserves. Currently, income and expenditure were expected to have a neutral balance for the year.
- Write-offs totalling £202,776.12 had arisen over the past three months. It was explained that every effort was made to recover money owed and write-offs were requested as a last resort, either when the debtor was untraceable or had absconded.
- The Council currently had £8.200 million of general reserves and £4.200 million of earmarked reserves available to protect the Council from unforeseen financial pressures.

The Chair invited Members to comment and ask questions.

During the course of the discussion, the following points were raised:

- It was highlighted the SCST had faced the real possibility of becoming insolvent. A Member asked how assured officers were that this situation would not occur again in the future. It was explained that regular discussions were being held between the Council and SCST and officers were vigilantly aware of the issues that could arise. SCST was a demand led service, and work had been undertaken to implement initiatives to generate savings.
- Referring to section 5.15 of the report 'It is absolutely in the Council's best interests to ensure the SCST's finances are in a robust position at contract end'. A Member asked when the contract was scheduled to end. It was reported that the contract was due to end in 2021/22 and it was in the Council's best interests to ensure SCST was in a financially robust position, in case it was deemed, at contract end that any existing liabilities owed by SCST should fall to the Council rather than the DfE. SBC officers had entered into discussions with DfE officials to obtain clarification on this matter.
- A Member asked what financial impact it was anticipated the Covid-19 virus would have on the Adult Social Care budget. It was explained

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that officers had been holding daily meetings to discuss and review the implications the Covid-19.

- In response to a query regarding staff of SCST, the Committee was advised that when the Trust was established the existing operational staff had been TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment) transferred over to the Trust. The Trust operated a strategic board, and one councillor had been appointed to sit as a board member.
- A Member asked who scrutinised SCST. It was explained that SCST was held to account by the DfE and external auditors. In addition, the Council's scrutiny panels could request reports and officer attendance at meetings. The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel was due to consider the SCST Annual Report at the meeting scheduled to be held on 15th April 2020.
- The Council was currently on target to achieve 79% of the savings agreed as part of the 2019/20 revenue budget. It was explained that planned savings targets had slipped mainly due to a delay in the third and fourth tier management restructure not being completed.

The Chair thanked the Service Lead, Finance for the report.

Resolved – That the Committee noted:

- (a) The reported underlying financial position of the Council, including the Slough Children's Services Trust, as at the third quarter of the year.
- (b) The management actions being undertaken by officers to reduce the budget pressures.
- (c) The potential impact on the Council's general reserves and associated implications for the Council based on the latest financial projections.
- (d) The virements and write-offs, as detailed in section 9 and 10 of the report.

65. Capital Monitoring Report at 31st December 2019

The Service Lead, Finance introduced a report that provided a summary of spend against capital budgets for the 2019-20 financial year, as at the end of December 2019, and confirmed the budgets to be re-profiled into future years.

Members were informed that in the first nine months of 2019-20, 72 % of the budget of £171.119 million had been spent; it was currently projected that 97% of the budget would be spent by the end of the financial year. Some of the budgets had been re-profiled into future financial years and would form part of the Capital Strategy report. The main areas of expenditure were: secondary expansion programme, corporate headquarter project, James Elliman Homes, Old Library site hotel development, Strategic Acquisition Board, and the Thames Valley University development.

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In relation to the Capital Programme project 'procuring of a new refuse fleet and grounds plant equipment and the capitalisation of domestic wheeled bins' a Member noted that a new refuse fleet had been procured two years' ago and asked why the fleet needed to be replaced so soon. The Service Lead, Finance agreed to seek further information from the relevant department and to provide an update to the Committee.

A Member queried why the capital loan for Nova House had been re-profiled. The Service Lead, Finance explained that there had been an underspend on the project; but he was unable to expand on the detailed reasons this had occurred.

Details regarding the refurbishment of Wexham House project was sought. It was agreed that the Service Lead, Finance would seek further information from the relevant department and provide an update to the Committee.

The Chair thanked the Service Lead, Finance for the report.

Resolved –

- (a) That the Committee noted the report, including the revised 2019-20 budget and the re-profiling of budgets into future years.
- (b) That the Service Lead, Finance be requested to circulate responses to the queries raised during the consideration of the report, as detailed above.

66. Forward Work Programme 2019/20

The Committee noted that the following reports were due to be considered at the meeting scheduled to be held on 16th April 2020:

- Heathrow Economic Development Plan and Vision
- Slough Violence Taskforce
- Q3 Performance and Projects (information only)

Members requested that the Q3 Performance and Projects report be considered as an information only report, unless any gold projects were showing as red. The Policy Insight Manager agreed to liaise with the Strategic Programme Management Office Manager to confirm the status of the gold projects.

Resolved – That, subject to the detail above, the Forward Work Programme 2019/20, be approved, as set out in Appendix A of the report.

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67. Members' Attendance Record 2019/20

Resolved - That the details of the Members' Attendance Record be noted.

68. Date of Next Meeting - 16th April 2020

Resolved – That the date of the next meeting was confirmed as 16th April 2020.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.45 pm)

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